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ABSTRACT

A 12-month longitudinal study was conducted in Brisbane, Australia, to investigate the interaction that takes place when a parent and young child read together. Parent-child book-reading episodes that took place in the home at the end of the preschool year of 25 randomly selected children and at the end of Year 1 at a State Primary School were analyzed and compared. In addition, the study incorporated assessments of the children's language and reading attainments and self-concept, interviews with parents and teachers, and observations of teachers' group story-reading behavior. Study findings included the following: (1) parents focused on story meaning, rather than on word meaning; (2) several parents discussed the text's illustrations; (3) children often modelled questions on those of the parent reading to them; (4) parents asked many inferential questions to which their children did not respond; (5) although parents had more utterances overall than the children, in highly interactive dyads, power was shared by parent and child, with the child contributing questions and comments; (6) the number of parent utterances and child comments decreased from preschool to Year 1; and (7) the amount and type of interaction between parent and child affected children's reading ability and self-concept. The findings have implications for parent programs as well as for the context in which literacy is taught in the schools and the target of community literacy programs. (AC)

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FAMILY LIFE IN AUSTRALIA

Paper presented at the Roundtable for the Center on Familes, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at the American Educational Research Conference in Atlanta, U.S.A. and at the International Reading Association Conference in San Antonio, U.S.A. in April 1993.

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THE PROJECT

This study examines the complex three - way interactions that take place when a parent and a child share a text. It endeavours to tease out the particular variables in this interaction that facilitate the child's later reading ability. As part of this, the study also investigates parent styles in such book reading episodes and how these change from when the child is a dependent reader to when the child is an independent reader, i.e. the transition period from the end of the child's Preschool Year to the end of the first year in Primary School. This period appears to have been neglected by researchers in early literacy.

Over the past 40 years , research has focussed increasingly on the home as the main factor in children's language development. In the last ten years in particular, parent and child book reading episodes in the home have been foregrounded as a major factor in children's literacy development. But in spite of the research that has been carried out, much is still unknown about what factors bring about this literacy growth.

> Nowhere is this need more acute than in studies of parent-child storybook-reading episodes. Longitudinal studies allow us to view development across time ... Descriptive research of this nature is very labor-intensive and longitudinal study of storybook reading is even more so. I doubt there will ever be large scale research of this type; Elizabeth Sulzby and I have eight families in a three year study we are conducting (Sulzby and Teale, 1983) and we find this a tremendous amount of data to deal with ... Thus we need additional careful longitudinal studies. But we are also at the point where some meta-analyses would be most useful... analyses which would draw data from many different sources and apply a consistent analytic framework (Teale & Sulzby, 1986, 199).

A parent reading a book to a child in the home is an important part of the cultural tradition of many Australians. When a parent reads with a child literacy learning occurs. Research has been carried out on the texts for young children (e.g. Meek, 1988; Williams, 1989) and on the verbal interaction between mother and child (e.g.

Snow, 1972; 1977; 1979; 1983; 1986; Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Wells, 1981; 1982; 1985; 1986; 1987; 1988) but the triple interactions that take place when a parent and a child share a book together have been neglected. Martinez and Roser (1985) point out that these studies are needed so that

> we begin to have a clearer notion of the adult-child-text relationship during story time. Such an understanding may eventually provide adults working with young children with a basis for determining how best to guide children toward successfully interacting with texts. However additional research is needed before specific recommendations can be made ...studies with other books, other adult-child dyads, and with additional text factors may aid in better understanding the language behavior of children and adults during story time (Martinez & Roser, 1985, 293)

The present study was born out of curiosity to know more about what parents do when they read with their child in the home, especially in this transition period from the end of Preschool to the end of Grade 1. The data have been drawn from many different sources - from the children, parents, siblings and teachers concerned using interviews, observations, video transcripts, and standardised tests. Different analyses have been used to explore which factors are critical to a child's literacy learning. These factors have been measured against the 'consistent analytical framework' (Teale & Sulzby , 1986, 199) that language is learnt through interaction with other people. This means not merely oral language but also literacy. The present study seeks to show that it is the interaction between parent and child that takes place when a parent and child read together that teaches the child to read, not merely reading to the child in a performance - like manner. This is not formal teaching but rather that the child internalises the information contained in such interactions in the home.

DESIGN

A longitudinal study over a twelve month period from the end of the children's Preschool Year to the end of Year 1 at Primary School was conducted. It incorporated an analysis of parent- child book reading episodes in the home with the parents reading an unfamiliar text. The study also involved assessment of the children's language and reading attainments and self concept. Interviews with parents and teachers and observations of teachers' group story reading behaviour were conducted.

In the light of some of the preliminary findings paralleling those of Wells' Bristol study, it was decided to test the children in 1990 when they were eight, and also in 1992 when they were ten years old to see if the results were compatible with Wells' later findings.

SUBJECTS

The subjects were 25 children drawn randomly from the two Year 1 classes at a State Primary School in Brisbane . This school was chosen because it has varied socio-economic levels. 15 were boys and 11 were girls. One of the girls left the study in March of her Grade 1 as her family moved to seek employment.

At the beginning of Grade 1, the majority of the children had turned six (16), nine were five year olds and one child was slightly older at seven. The majority of children (21) had been born in Brisbane while two others had been born in other towns in Queensland. Two children were born in other states of Australia, while one was born in New Zealand. Two subjects were only children, but the majority

(14) were the oldest child while three were in the middle, and seven were the youngest child in the family.

PARENTS

All families had a mother who had at least some high school education, though only three had Bachelor's degrees and two had other post-school education. In contrast, in the 23 families with a father, one had no high school education, but more fathers than mothers had post - school qualifications. Fathers' occupations ranged from medical doctor, research scientist and engineer through such occupations as electrician, draftsman, and technical officer to three fathers being unemployed.

On the other hand, the occupations of the mothers who worked outside the home were not as varied with a bank officer being the most prestigious, down through secretarial work and shop assistant to nursing home aide.

Apart from the previously mentioned family which transferred interstate, another couple were divorced and one father died suddenly towards the end of first year of the study. There were two house - husbands and three more mothers were working fulltime by the end of the first year of the study. These families have remained in the study.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS / PROCEDURES

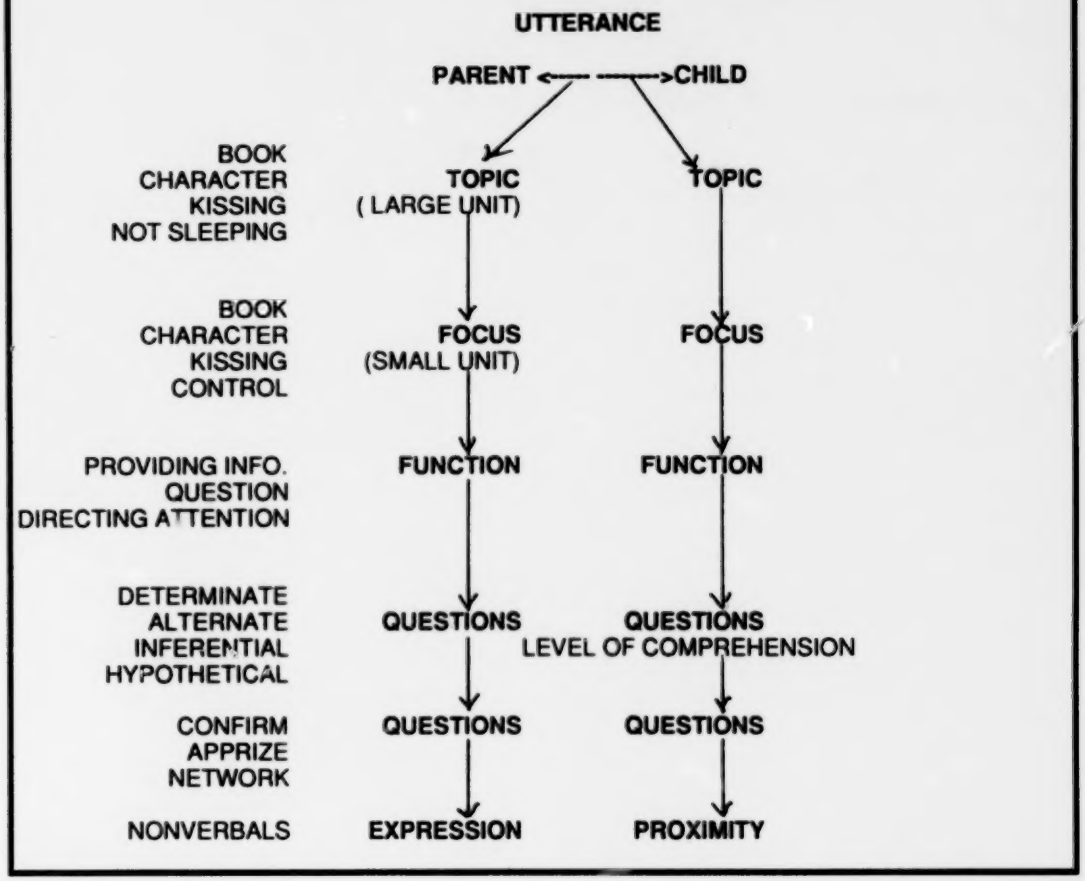
At the end of the child's preschool and at the end of Year 1 at school, I went in to each child's home and interviewed the parent about demographic aspects of the family, the families literacy practices and parents attitudes and ideologies about literacy. On both occasions, the parent and child were videoed reading the picture

book, **Sloppy Kisses** which was chosen because it had just been published and so was an unknown text to all the families. By videoing all the dyads of parent and child reading the same text there was a basis for comparison. In most homes only one parent read to the child, in others both mother and father read the texts. I also interviewed the children's teachers at both Preschool and Year 1 and videoed them reading to groups of the children as part of their daily routine but I will report on those findings at a later date.

Throughout Grade 1, various standardised tests were conducted on the individual children in the project . Children were tested early in the year for their concepts of literacy using Kemp's CURL test, then at various times throughout the year for language and reading abilities, using TELD and TERA respectively. Towards the end of Grade 1 they were tested using the Revised Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test and the Piers- Harris Self Concept test. Running records on whether the children were dependent or independent readers were also carried out at the end of Grade 1 and Holdaway's Informal Prose Inventory was used at the end of Year 3 to assess the children's reading ability at age 8. At both these times the children were also interviewed about how they had learnt to read and their reading strategies.

The videos of the parent and child reading **Sloppy Kisses** were transcribed and coded using different analyses shown in the diagram below.

DIAGRAM 1 : ANALYSIS OF PARENT - CHILD-TEXT INTERACTIONS DURING BOOK READING IN THE HOME



RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Because of time limitations associated with the presentation of this paper only some of the results of the study will be discussed today.

During both readings parents showed great variation in individual style of reading **Sloppy Kisses.** It is interesting to note that contrary to Flood's (1977) research, no parents discussed the cover of the text but a few parents contextualised the narrative by linking it to their child's past experience as Brendan's mother does in this Preschool reading -

Mother: We'll read **Sloppy Kisses** first.

Sloppy Kisses

Brendan, that's like the kids don't like me kissing them with my lipstick on, eh?

Brendan: (laughing) Yeah!

During the reading, parents focussed on the story meaning, not on word meaning. Only one parent explained a word meaning to her child - 'papa' for 'daddy' or 'father - a word only used by one family in the study. There was no discussion in either the Preschool or the Grade 1 reading about letters or indeed 'print'.

Several parents focussed the discussion on the illustrations in the text as in this Preschool reading by Samantha's mother -

Mother:

Emmy-Lou kissed Papa goodbye
when she went to school.
And when they came home,
it started all over again.
Emmy Lou's family just loved to kiss.

Mother: There's Papa going to work.

They're a funny family aren't they?

They look like piggies.

Sam: They are! (laughs)

Oh look at that! (points to illustration)

Mother: Have you ever seen a piggy kiss?

I reckon they grunt (makes grunting noise)

Sam: Yes ! (Mother and Sam both laugh)

There are also frequent examples in the transcripts of children modelling questions on those of the parent reading to them, for example, in the Preschool reading of **Sloppy Kisses** after 'Emmy Lou snuggled down under her covers. It took her a long time to get to sleep', Alice's mother asked 'I wonder why?', an inferential question that Alice did not answer. Later during the same reading after 'One night Emmy Lou couldn't get to sleep ...No matter what she did she could not get to sleep" Alice asked the same question I wonder why?' Her mother answered 'I don't know. Let's read on.'

During both readings parents asked many inferential questions which their children did not respond to. Alice's mother's - 'I wonder why' was asked by 10 parents over both readings and was mostly allowed to 'plop' or be ignored by the child. In some readings where the child was unable to answer the question, the parent 'scaffolded'or helped the child succeed by providing more information as in this interaction with Sean and his mother during the Grade 1 reading -

Mother: **It took her a long time to get to sleep.**

Mother: Why do you think it took her so long to get to sleep?

Sean: Cause she was thinking.

Mother: She just had a pat on the shoulder instead of her usual kiss goodnight, didn't she?

Here, Sean's mother provided him with the necessary information in the form of a confirm verify reassure type question, a tag question which threw the conversation over to him. He responded nonverbally by nodding his head to show he understood.

When a child could not answer an inferential question, some parents provided more information as Sean's mother did, but then dropped the level of comprehension required by asking a determinate comprehension question as in this interaction between Brian and his mother during the Grade 1 reading -

Mother: Why do you think it took her a long time to get to sleep?
(INFERENTIAL)
She's thinking about what they said about kissing .
(PROVIDING INFORMATION)
You find it easy to get to sleep cause you always have a kiss goodnight, don't you?
(DETERMINATE)

In the highly interactive dyads, many parents 'uped the ante' during the Grade 1 reading by asking questions that demanded a higher level of comprehension from their child. The parents were unaware of doing this, that is, they were interacting with their child during the reading, not consciously teaching the child. This is similar to the parent using simpler lexis and grammatical structure in language to converse with a baby or how they scaffold the child's language or tasks in the early years. This is in keeping with the research findings of Snow, Nathan and Perlmann (1983).

During the readings of **Sloppy Kisses** some parents even focussed their discussion at a deeper level on the ideology of the text. An analysis of the discourse between two dyads during the reading of **Sloppy Kisses** shows that both mothers used similar strategies to transmit the ideology of the text. Both used tag questions i.e. confirm verify probe or confirm verify reassure questions to include their child in the conversation while directing attention to the ideology by explicit information providing statements. They also linked the ideology included in the text to their child's own everyday experience thus making it real and powerful for the child.

Unlike Flood's (1977) research, no parent asked any comprehension questions at the end of the text at either Preschool or Grade 1 levels. They did, however frequently commented on their own enjoyment of the book or ask if the child enjoyed the text .

Although the parents had more utterances overall than the children, in the highly interactive dyads, the power was shared by parent and child, with the child contributing questions and comments, not merely responding to the parent's questions and comments. This was in contrast to the Grade 1 teachers' readings where the teacher alone controlled the interaction.

Table 1 : Means and standard deviations of parent and child variables for Sloppy Kisses reading at the end of Preschool and Grade 1

•• p< .05 • p< .01 * Variables are numbers of occurrences of each type of verbal behaviour

		Parent			Child	
Variable*	Preschool	Grade 1	t-test	Preschool	Grade 1	t-test
Utterances	M11.6	4.7	4.8••	4.1	1.0	3.3••
	SD9.4	6.5		4.8	1.6	
Questions	M4.7	2.1	4.6••	.4	.04	1.4
	SD4.4	2.9		1.4	.2	
Confirm verify probe ques.	M.3	.2	.3	.04	0	0
	SD1.0	.5		.2	.2	
Confirm verify reassure ques.	M1.2	.8	1.9	.04	0	1.0
	SD1.4	1.4		.2	0	
Confirm enquire check ques.	M.7	.08	3.5••	.04	0	1.0
	SD.9	.3		.2	0	
Confirm enquire ask ques.	M1.4	.6	3.6••	.1	0	1.4
	SD1.7	1.0		.4	0	
Apprize vague ques.	M.1	.04	1.0	.04	08	-1.0
	SD.3	.2		.2	.3	
Apprize precise explain ques.	M.1	.1	-.4	0	0	0
	SD.3	.3		0	0	
Apprize precise specify ques.	M.9	.3	2.1•	.1	0	1.8
	SD1.4	.6		.3	0	
Determinate questions	M1.8	.5	3.9••	.4	.04	1.4
	SD1.9	.9		1.	1.2	
Alternate questions	M2.0	1.0	2.5••	.1	0	1.0
	SD2.3	1.7		.4	0	
Inferential questions	M.9	.6	1.4	0	0	0
	SD1.4	1.0		0	0	
Hypothetical questions	M.04	.04	0	0	0	0
	SD.2	.2		0	0	
Comments	M5.7	2.4	4.4••	1.3	.4	2.5•
	SD4.6	4.1		1.9	.7	
Providing infor comments	M4.4	1.7	3.7••	1.2	.3	2.9••
	SD4.3	3.2		1.8	.6	
Directing attention comment	M1.6	.7	2.4••	.04.	.1	1.0
	SD1.4	.3		.2	.3	
Response	M1.0	.3	2.0	2.4	.6	2.8••
	SD2.0	.5		3.0	.4	

It can be seen from Table 1 that there were significant changes from Preschool to Grade 1. The number of parent utterances during the reading of **Sloppy Kisses** decreased from the Preschool reading in Grade 1. There was great variation in parent reading style ranging from those who were highly interactive with their child during the reading to those who had little or no verbal interaction. The decrease in interaction from the Preschool reading to the Grade 1 reading can be seen at the non-interactive end of this continuium where there were three dyads with no interaction at the Preschool level but ten dyads with no interaction and five with only one or two utterances at the Grade 1 level. This is in keeping with Heath's (1980) findings that interactive behaviour during story reading episodes in the home change as the child gets older. Initially, parents encouraged interaction but by the age of three [in this study age six] parents expect the child to sit still, listen quietly to the text, and gain information from it as they are expected to do in many classrooms.

THE CHILDREN

The amount of child comment at the Grade 1 reading fell to a highly significant degree (to .05) which may suggest that even after one year of formal schooling children have learned to be passive listeners of stories, not actively interacting with either the person reading the text nor the text itself. This may be because at Grade 1 level these children had been read to as a whole class of twenty children not individually or in small groups as they had been at Preschool and in the home, and although there was some interaction between children and teacher during Shared Book reading sessions, children's comments or questions were discouraged and regarded as 'interruptions' at other times when the teacher read aloud to all the children. These reading aloud sessions were more performance oriented than interactive.

CORRELATION OF VARIABLES

Children's Understanding of Reading Language which tested the children's understanding of literacy, correlates not only with the other tests but highly correlates with the children's reading scores at both six and eight years of age. This is in keeping with Well's Bristol Project findings. The Test of Early Language Development correlates with the children's reading scores at age six only, but the Test of Early Reading Ability correlates highly with their reading scores at both six and eight. Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Revised) correlates highly with their reading scores at six and also has significant correlation at age eight while the Piers- Harris Self Concept Test correlates not only with the children's reading scores at both six and eight, but also with the frequency of reading aloud sessions in their home and the proximity between them and their parent during such sessions. This suggests that reading aloud to children in the home affirms the child's self worth which in turn affects their reading ability.

The correlations of greatest significance in the study are found in the fact that the number of parent utterances correlate with the child's reading at both six and eight suggesting it is not merely reading to the child which facilitates their reading but the amount of interaction between parent and child. Not merely the amount of talk but also the type of talk. This is shown by the correlation of the child's reading at age six and eight with alternate questions in particular tag questions which, as Snow (1977) suggests, pass the conversation over to the child thus affirming the child and also increasing the interaction between the two. This is also verified by the correlation of parent utterances and the child's self concept and, in turn, the correlation of self concept with reading at both six and eight. There is also a correlation of confirm enquire ask type questions and apprize precise specify

questions with the child's reading. This may highlight the particular parent language behaviours which expedite the child's reading. Many parents use these unconsciously during reading aloud interactions.

It is interesting to note that during Shared Book sessions the Year 1 mainly used these same types of questions which may explain in part at least why there is this correlation. The amount of parent utterances also correlates at a .1% level with the amount of child utterances and visa versa. Similarly there are high correlations of child utterances with various, but not all, question types. A microanalysis of the discourse shows this is logical as one usually verbally responds to a question but not always to a comment. A correlation of the parent providing information and the child providing information suggests the importance of parents modelling language. Overall, the number and level of correlation between the variables strongly suggest that reading aloud in the home is of great influence on the child's reading ability at school.

IMPLICATIONS

This study has revealed that parent, child and text reading aloud in the home changes in the transition period from preschool to Grade 1, from when most children are dependent readers to when most are independent readers at least on suitable text. It shows that reading is a social process, learnt in interaction with other people. Family storybook reading is seen as a vital social construct for the child's later independent reading. This has implications which apply to parents, teachers and schools, and society at large.

PARENT IMPLICATIONS

From the study, parents have shown they facilitate their child's literacy learning long before the child begins formal schooling. Parents do this across all educational and socio-economic levels. Instinctively they adapt the language they use in interactions with their child to suit the language level, including the reading level, of the child:

> Learning to read is a gradual process that begins early in the child's life, not a sudden happening that comes about when the child enters school. The roots of literacy are anchored within the social network of the family (Chapman, 1986: 11).

It is the interaction between parent and child that takes place when a parent reads to a child that facilitates this child's reading. In particular, reading is aided by the types of questions that the parent uses. Some of these questions, commonly known as 'tag questions' but labelled 'confirm verify probe' and 'confirm verify reassure' in the Hasan analysis, are ones that pass the conversation over to the child. This not only makes the child responsible for his/her own learning but also, and perhaps more importantly, appears to strengthen the relationship between parent and child. Heath (1984) found that when a black teenage mother was encouraged to read to her young son she grew to know him better and many discipline problems disappeared - 'When parents and children read stories together, they learn about themselves and gain a deeper understanding of one another' (Taylor and Strickland, 1986: 1).

'Confirm enquire ask' questions where the verbal process comes first as in 'Did you see the mother?' and 'apprize precise specify' questions - the 'wh' questions that require specific information also correlate with the child's reading ability at both age six and eight. A more specific study, with a larger sample, is needed to investigate

further which parent question types during book reading sessions help children to read, and exactly how these types of questions facilitate children's reading ability.

A most important implication for parents from the study is that its positive findings need widespread dissemination to parents via the media, school and parent groups. Parents need to be told that they are most important to their children's intellectual growth, not least of all because of the close affective links between parent and child. Future research is required to investigate more fully the importance of these affective links with the child's ability to read. The importance of the parent-child relationship in literacy learning must not be under estimated:

> The years before a child reads are replete with the impact of environmental experiences which present him to the reading teacher with certain skills, concepts, feelings and knowledge which form the pre-reading base from which she will need to build ...The role of 'parenting' is so vital to the arranging of such accumulations that the role of being 'the first teacher of reading' is unmistakable. (Ward, 1970: 756)

These findings have implications for parent programs in particular. Many of the existing programs for parents begin with the premise that parents have a great deal to learn from **teachers.** The findings of this study shake the very foundation of this belief. They prove that parents of varying socioeconomic and educational levels <u>are</u> teaching their children essential literacy concepts and skills during everyday reading aloud sessions in the home.

Parent programs need to be taken away from the school settings into church and community settings. Some parents have had negative school experiences themselves which a school-based parent program tends to exacerbate. In a less emotionally charged environment, parents are more likely to be positive and get on with the business of understanding the present education system. Ideally, parents

themselves, not teachers as such, should facilitate such parent programs which would in turn train other parents to facilitate other parent groups. In this way a network of parents sharing with other parents as equals would emerge.

TEACHER AND SCHOOL IMPLICATIONS

There is also a glaring need for more longitudinal studies of family literacy practices in low socioeconomic families for, although this study shows that socioeconomic levels overall were uncorrelated with the other variables, it may be significant that socioeconomic levels did correlate with the children's reading ability at age 8. More in-depth and longitudinal studies of low socioeconomic families are needed to understand this correlation more fully. Studies are likewise needed to explore if, indeed, story reading in low socioeconomic families is a different literacy event than it is in schools.

This present study suggests there are some children whc, from their family book reading practices, have been familiarised with the same types of questions that teachers use during book reading episodes in school. Surely these children are advantaged at school, compared with children who have come from family environments where literacy events are quite different from those in the classroom. Pelligrini (1991) suggests that the reason children fail at school is because of they are not familiar with the contexts in which they are expected to learn at school.

They may also fail in literacy learning in school because of their limited knowledge about literacy. Children's knowledge of literacy on entering Grade 1 was shown in this study to correlate with their reading ability at both age 6 and 8 years. The researcher intends investigating if it also correlates with their reading ability at age 10 in 1992 as did the children's knowledge of literacy in Wells' Bristol study - 'substantial correlations were found between the children's knowledge of literacy on entry to school ...five years later at about the age of ten' (Wells, 1987: 116).

Instead of training parentsto be second rate teachers, teachers need to regard them as the child's first teacher and perhaps the most crucial because of the close affective bonds between parent and child. This interviw data from this study shows that **all** the parents, regardless of socioeconomic or education levels,want the best for their child. Some, however, lack self confidence in their own ability to teach their child.

Teachers, then, need to see parents as partners in fostering children literacy growth.

This has implications for reading pedagogy. The findings of the study that it is the **interaction** between the adult and child during reading aloud that facilitates children's reading ability, not merely reading aloud to a child, has serious implications for classroom strategies. It would seem to suggest that what is called 'paired reading' is a more suitable strategy for Grade 1. This would necessitate more adults being actively involved in the classroom. These could be parents or other community members. Intergenerational programs such as LAP (Learning Assisted Programs) where older members of the community, often those who are retired, team up with a child to help them learn, have had great success in the few Australian communities where these programs have been introduced. Further research is needed to evaluate such programs and to begin new ones. Our aging population is a rich and often untapped resource in early childhood classrooms. As well as providing much needed adult attention and literacy skills and knowledge to the children at risk, such programs have far reaching community implications in that they also provide the adults involved with a very real purpose in life, and build relationships across generations that enrich the lives of all the participants.

COMMUNITY IMPLICATIONS

In an even broader perspective, the community needs to be made aware of the waste of 'parent power' in this crucial area of literacy. Huge government monies, both state and national, are spent annually on 'adult literacy'. In Australia, for example (September 1991) a white paper has been just released which targets adult literacy as a five year priority area. While there is undoubtedly a need to improve literacy for adults, the findings of this project on parents reading aloud to children in the home highlights the need to lessen, if not, stop these literacy problems from happening.

> It can be seen that the attitudes and skills gained in a family with warm and secure relationships within the family and supportive, reliable relationships with extended family, friends and wider community constitutes a resource that is just as real as economic resources and security. (Eastman, 1989: 45)

As parents interacted more with their children they would realise the great enjoyment and satisfaction to be found in sharing a text together. Families would grow closer together. This may have profound social implications resulting in not only a more literate society but also a more emotionally stable one.

Buber (1969) said 'This fragile life between birth and death can nevertheless be a fulfilment - if it is a dialogue'. This also applies to a parent and child reading a text in the home. Some of the factors that bring independent reading in that child to fulfilment can be isolated by studies such as this, but the precious feelings of warmth and love generated from such dialogue can never be measured - only felt. Perhaps it is in this affective area that reading aloud brings a life long love of literacy to fulfilment.

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